

For immediate release

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County Seeing Increase in Flu Activity; Not Too Late for Flu Shot

Lewis and Clark County, like much of the nation, has seen a jump in flu cases recently. Although this flu season has been relatively mild so far, it's expected to get worse in coming weeks, according to health officials.

"We've been lucky so far, and people may have been lulled into a false sense of security," said Karen Dobson Wandel, public health nurse supervisor at Lewis and Clark Public Health. "But we're seeing a sharp increase now of both influenza types A and B. Last year, new flu cases were being reported as late as May, so we could have a few more months of flu activity in store."

Wandel said it's not too late to get a flu shot, which takes about two weeks to become effective.

So far this season, laboratory tests have confirmed 23 cases of flu in the county, 18 of them since the first of the year, Wandel said. Only five of those 23 people had been vaccinated this year. About half were between the ages of 25 and 50.

The number of confirmed cases is often "only the tip of the iceberg," she added. Many more cases are not officially confirmed through lab tests.

So far this season, no deaths have been attributed to flu in the county, but two people had died of flu elsewhere in Montana as of Jan. 23, according to the state health department. One county resident was hospitalized last October with what was presumed to be flu, Wandel said.

The flu season generally runs from October through March, although the first case of the county this season occurred in September.

Public health officials recommend an annual flu shot for everyone over 6 months of age. Vaccination is particularly important for people at high risk of serious flu-related complications and their close contacts. This includes infants; pregnant women; kids and adults with chronic medical conditions like chronic breathing problems, cancer, diabetes, or heart disease; and adults 65 or older.

If you have a high risk and get flu symptoms, seek medical attention early. There are effective medications to treat the flu, but only if they're started within the first few days of illness.

The health department urges county residents to protect themselves and their community from flu by covering coughs and sneezes, staying away from sick people, staying home when sick, and washing hands often to help stop the spread of flu viruses.

The health department offers flu shots Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at 1930 Ninth Avenue. No appointment is needed, and the department bills all insurance providers.